

## TRANSATLANTIC MERMAIDS: LITERARY AND CULTURAL FANTASIES FROM COPENHAGEN TO HAITI AND THE UNITED STATES

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Article received on 14.02.2014

Accepted on 07.07.2014

### ABSTRACT

The mermaid functions as a transatlantic figure, travelling from European shores to Africa and the Caribbean Islands. This article explores her literary configurations from Hans Christian Andersen's "The Little Mermaid" (1836) to Rosa Guy's revision of Andersen's tale set in Haiti, *My Love, My Love: The Peasant Girl* (1985) and lyricist Lynn Ahrens and composer Stephen Flaherty revision of Guy's tale as a Broadway musical, *Once on this Island* (1990). Instead of offering wealth and transformation, she signals the inaccessibility of wealth to those born in the lower classes; she is linked to broader histories of colonialism and imperialism. In Andersen's story, she represents the radical class divisions of nineteenth-century Danish society. In Guy's story, she symbolizes the ongoing class and color struggle of Haiti's postcolonial nation. In the Broadway hit *Once on This Island*, she becomes an imperial mirage that veils the ongoing troubled relationship between Haiti and the United States. Through all these stories, the mermaid serves as a fantasy that elides imperialist and colonialist histories, promising wealth and material gain, but often referencing the opposite—poverty, classism, and histories of colonial and imperial aggression.

### KEYWORDS

Mermaid, Haiti, Hans Christian Andersen, "The Little Mermaid", Rosa Guy, *My Love, My Love or The Peasant Girl*, Lynn Ahrens, Stephen Flaherty, *Once on This Island*.

### SIRENAS TRANSATLÁNTICAS: FANTASÍAS LITERARIAS Y CULTURALES DESDE COPENHAGUE A ESTADOS UNIDOS, PASANDO POR HAITÍ

### RESUMEN

La sirena opera como una figura transatlántica que ha viajado desde las costas europeas hasta África y las islas del Caribe. Este artículo explora su configuración literaria, desde "La sirenita" (1836), de Hans Christian Andersen, hasta la recreación de Rosa Guy del cuento de Andersen ambientada en Haití, *My Love, My Love: The Peasant Girl* (1985), y la adaptación de la obra de Guy como musical de Broadway, *Once on This Island* (1990), a cargo de Lynn Ahrens (letra) y Stephen Flaherty (música). En vez de ofrecer riqueza y transformación, la sirena marca la imposibilidad de las clases más bajas de acceder al bienestar material. Queda vinculada al panorama más amplio del colonialismo y del imperialismo. En el relato de Andersen, representa la división radical de clases de la sociedad danesa del siglo XIX. En la obra de Guy, simboliza la presente lucha racial y de clases en el Haití poscolonial. En el éxito de Broadway, *Once on this Island*, se convierte en un espejismo imperialista que enmascara la todavía conflictiva relación entre Haití y Estados Unidos. En todos estos relatos, la sirena actúa como fantasía que elude el imperialismo y el colonialismo, prometiendo bienestar y mejoras materiales, pero remitiendo a menudo a lo contrario: pobreza, clasismo y agresión colonialista e imperialista.

### PALABRAS CLAVE

Sirena, Haití, Hans Christian Andersen, "La sirenita", Rosa Guy, *My Love, My Love or The Peasant Girl*, Lynn Ahrens, Stephen Flaherty, *Once on This Island*.

## 1. TRANSNATIONAL WATER SPIRITS: AN INTRODUCTION

Water spirits imaginatively cross oceanic divides, sharing a set of characteristics in ritual, art, religion, and myth. Typically possessing great beauty, they appear variably in Europe as mermaids or sirens, in West Africa as Mami Wata and her variants, and in the Caribbean as Watramama (Suriname, Guyana), Mamadjo (Grenada), Yemanya/Yemaya (Brazil/Cuba), La Sirène and Erzulie (Haiti), and Lamanté (Martinique) (Stipriaan 2003: 327). In the arts, ceramics, and myth of ancient Rome and Greece, she appears as a half bird, half woman, with arms depicted like claws. In Homer's *Odyssey*, the sirens bear no recorded form yet they sing, attempting to lure sailors to their demise (1200s-600 BC). In Ovid's *Métamorphoses* (books V, lines 545-563), Publius Ovidius Naso asks, "But why have you, Sirens, skilled in song, daughters of Acheloüs, the feathers and claws of birds, while still bearing human faces?" Scholars remain uncertain how she transformed into a half-fish/half-woman, but she populates the world in a wide range of forms, arriving in Africa in her traditional half-fish/half-woman configuration with the onset of trade from Europe, carrying a signature comb and mirror into which she gazes at her reflection (Drewal 1988b: 161-162). From Africa, scholars believe she travelled to the Caribbean through exploration, colonization, and the slave trade. Columbus believed he saw mermaids offshore, noted in his first journal of his Caribbean voyage to Haiti: "They are not as beautiful as they are painted, though to some extent they have the form of a human face" (2010: 154).

In European folklore, scholars theorize that she emerged in response to sailors' fear of the sea; typically she appears sitting on ledges or rising from the deep seas, luring them with her voice to dangerous areas where ships might sink. In German, Scandinavian, English, and Celtic lore she wears some type of garment—a veil, a scarf, a cloak—that if captured may reward the owner with a gift of healing, gold, cattle, or progeny. She might become a woman and dutifully care for a man's family and keep house, but if she finds her garment, she will snatch it and return to the sea (Beck 1973: 231). At the same time, stories of revenge inform the mermaid's history—she will bring disaster to those who fail to keep their promises to her (Beck 1973: 231). When she rises to the surface, she might primp herself and go to town, yet she returns, invariably, to her opulent castle beneath the sea.

In West-African and Afro-Caribbean lore, she occupies a larger pantheon of water spirits, fully in place before the arrival of Europeans. Present in lakes, rivers, and oceans, she is a syncretic goddess in her Mami Wata form. Henry Drewel, who has completed extensive work on Mami Wata (pidgin for "Mother of Water") argues that West Africans perceive her as a foreign

goddess (1988a:102); her image bears evidence of European and Indian influences—her appearance with snakes (from the imagery of Hinduism and snake charmers), her donning of gold bracelets, her long luxuriant hair, her light skin, and her mirror (from both Indian and European sources) (Drewal 1988b: 162). Barbara Frank, an ethnologist who has studied the rising popularity of Mami Wata during the nineteenth and twentieth century in West Africa, believes that she represents Western values of individualism and wealth in West African communities; she is associated with sterility or abstinence. As Frank explains,

Mami Wata is a projection of the European model not only with regard to her wealth, love of luxury, and powers, but also with regard to the loneliness she exacts. Her European appearance and her possession of modern luxury goods symbolize antisocial behavior according to traditional West African values (1995: 342).

She negotiates contracts with her lovers; she requires that they remain faithful only to her, while she remains childless.

Her translation to the New World via slave ships and explorers (often as a figurehead on ships) led to her absorption into a myriad of faiths and belief systems, but she has no pan-Caribbean form. In Cuba, she is Yemaya, goddess of the sea. In Haiti, she is considered part of a family of Ezulies, Vodou goddesses of water who take multiple forms, including that of Lasirèn (from the French *la sirène*) who offers wealth and romance but also potential death (Houlberg 1996: 32). Believers create “altars stuffed with all kinds of (often Western) consumer goods which have reminded some observers of cargo cults, others of the dressing tables of colonial European ladies” (Stipriaan 2003: 325). She shows up in ceremonial moments, possessing participants, offering advice, support, or healing (Stipriann 2003: 325). Mirrors on these altars represent the sea. Folk images of her have become a common part of popular culture in Africa and the Caribbean, making their way into the United States art markets.

Her journeys through folklore, art, and religion find their echoes in literature. Hans Christian Andersen penned his world famous tale “The Little Mermaid” in 1835, and it has since undergone multiple revisions, including a young adult version set in Haiti, Rosa Guy’s *My Love, My Love or The Peasant Girl* (1985) and a musical (a revision of Guy’s book) by lyricist Lynn Ahrens and composer Stephen Flaherty called *Once on This Island*, which opened on Broadway in 1990. In Andersen’s signature tale, a young mermaid leaves her undersea family when she falls in love with a handsome prince, hoping she can gain eternal life through marriage to a human. Making a

contract with the sea witch, she gives up her gorgeous voice in exchange for legs, rendering herself dumb but able to rise through the sea to walk on land. This quest for the Prince—ending with her death and spiritual rebirth attained through moral action—speaks to the difficulty of class ascension in nineteenth-century Denmark. Guy, a Trinidadian-born New Yorker, generates a postcolonial critique of the classism that informs Andersen’s tale. In a book marketed as “The lush Caribbean retelling of Hans Christian Andersen’s ‘The Little Mermaid,’ ” she relies on the imagery of Haitian Vodou to explore how romantic fantasies of class ascent ignore other cycles of oppression, particularly colonial and imperialist fantasies that invigorate economic, social, and environmental cycles of destruction. This searing critique of colonialism loses its power, however, in the 1990 revision of Guy’s tale, *Once on This Island*. Ahrens and Flaherty create an idealized tropical island where the dark-skinned poor and the light-skinned rich find fertile ground for connection through the mermaid figure’s sacrificial death. This romance, set on an unnamed island, elides the troubled relationship between the United States and Haiti that reached a crescendo during the 1980s and early 1990s. This essay will explore the various ways the mermaid functions as a trope for class relations, legitimizing relations of power implicit in ideologies of domination.

## 2. HANS CHRISTIAN ANDERSEN’S “THE LITTLE MERMAID”: CLASS ASCENSION THROUGH MUTILATION

As a leading biographer, Elias Bredsdorff, argues, Andersen actively sought approval of the upper classes, horrified by his own poor beginnings (Bredsdorff 1975: 152-5). He calls himself a “swamp plant” in a letter to a friend, a description that articulates his own distaste for his origins; the image evokes the decaying half-plant, half-mermaid figures that populate the “marshy land” of the sea witch in “The Little Mermaid” where the scattered remains of human skeletons lie buried (Bredsdorff 1975: 16). While Andersen’s origins did remain somewhat murky to him (with tales of high-born relatives a part of his origin story relayed by his grandmother), he was born to a cobbler in 1805 in Odense, Denmark (Bredsdorff 1975: 15). After his father’s death, with his fine singing voice, Andersen (at age fourteen) found employment in the Royal Danish Theatre in Copenhagen. There he attracted the attention of Jonas Collin, a Danish legal administrator who took an interest in Andersen and provided him with an advanced education (Zipes 2005: 6). Despite Andersen’s educational successes, he was never fully accepted by the upper echelon. Denmark was undergoing a radical transition in its economy, from feudal aristocracy to the rise of a thriving, educated

bourgeoisie who reinforced class divisions through essentialist ideology that defined “aptitude” and “intelligence” as inherited traits that determined one’s station (Zipes 2005: 52-3). As Bredsdorff notes,

In Danish society of the early nineteenth century it was almost impossible to break through class barriers. Almost the only exceptions were a few individuals with unusual artistic gifts: Bertel Thorvaldsen, Fru Heiberg, and Hans Christian Andersen. And even they had occasionally to be put in their place and reminded of their low origin (1975: 154).

Anxieties about class origins surface repeatedly throughout Andersen’s fairy tales in which characters such as the ugly duckling (the titular character of the story, published in 1844) discover that they were born of royalty all along. The duckling discovers he had always been a swan (simply born in the wrong nest); he is secretly a “royal bird,” who is finally recognized as a member of aristocratic society at the story’s end (Andersen 1984: 21). In earlier tales such as “The Little Mermaid,” the central character is not so fortunate; the Prince fails to recognize her royal birth. Her heritage remains invisible to him, in part because she cannot speak because of her bargain with the sea witch—her voice for legs. Her self-mutilation, Rhoda Zuk argues, suggest the “grotesque and painful transformations suffered by the exotically foreign and racially marked subject aspiring to be on equal terms with a ‘superior’ race” (1997-8: 166). While imperialist fantasies do inform Andersen’s portrayal of the prince (in his ship with its many flags) and ultimately the mermaid’s transformation into a “daughter of the air,” the story, I will argue, relies more completely on codes of class that informed Andersen’s anxieties about his own personal relations.

Andersen’s mermaid echoes the author’s own struggles to be accepted by his adoptive father and brother, Edvard, both upper class administrators. Andersen’s letters to family and friends highlight the intensity of the class issues and the impossibility of moving from one universe to another. In 1845, Andersen wrote to his adoptive father:

You know that my greatest vanity, or call it rather joy, consists in making you realize that I am worthy of you. All the kind appreciation I get makes me think of you. I am truly popular, truly appreciated abroad, I am famous—all right, you are smiling. But the cream of the nations fly towards me, I find myself accepted in all families, the greatest compliments are paid to me by princes and by the most gifted of men. You should see the way people in so-called High Society gather round me. Oh, no one at home thinks of this among the many who entirely ignore me and who might be happy to enjoy a drop of the homage paid to me. . . . You must know, you my beloved father must understand that you did not misjudge me when you accepted me as your son, when you helped and protected me (Bredsdorff 1975: 179).

Seeking to prove his worth, Andersen attests to the ability of European aristocracy to recognize his value (and therefore inherent aptitude and intelligence), acceptance that Jonas Collins never gave. The repetitive cycle of the desire for approval similarly found expression through his relationship with his brother, who negotiated business contracts for him, copy edited his work, and criticized him, trying to manage Andersen's self presentation (Bredsdorff 1975: 84-85). Andersen wrote to Edvard in 1830 that he hoped Edvard could forget the "conditions of [Andersen's] birth" so that he could find in Andersen a "candid and cordial friend" (qtd. in Bredsdorff 1975: 84). He experienced his birth into poverty as an eternal stigma, even after he had achieved world fame. On April 8, 1884, he wrote to his good friend Mrs. Signe Laessøe from Florence, after she had suggested he would find true love on his return to Denmark, "God in Heaven! you know well how ugly I am, and how poor I shall always be, and these are things everybody considers, whomsoever the heart may choose, and very properly too" (Andersen 2010: 131). Likewise, the little mermaid suffers from conditions of birth that she cannot erase. Even though she is born to wealth, the lower depths of her birth forever limit her ability to find "true love."

The tale opens with the mermaid under the sea, living in a castle with her grandmother, father, and five sisters, each of whom will rise to the surface when they are fifteen. This rite of passage sets the stage for the mermaid's downfall; below the water she is known for her great beauty, voice, and garden. The grandmother, the Queen, considers herself of "high birth," so she wears "twelve oysters on her tail" (Andersen 1984: 134). She forces the little mermaid (who goes by no other name in the story) to wear "eight great oysters . . . to show her high rank" (137). During her visit to the surface, she spots the Prince, enjoying his sixteenth birthday aboard a ship with "the flags of all nations" waving in the air amidst a party attending by a "number of well-dressed people" (137); following a sudden storm, she rescues him and leaves him on shore, falling in love with him at that moment. She longs to return to land and questions her grandmother about the "upper world" or the "land above the sea" (140) where people could "fly over the sea in ships . . . and the lands they possessed . . . stretched far beyond the reach of her sight" (140). Here, achieving a higher class coincides with imperialist fantasies. After death, such hierarchical relations continue, according to the grandmother's teachings: "We have not immortal souls, we shall never live again; but, like the green sea-weed, when once it has been cut off, we can never flourish more. Human beings, on the contrary, have a soul which lives forever . . . [T]hey rise to unknown and glorious regions which we shall never see" (140). The mermaid can only rise to such heights if she can convince a human to marry her, but since she is born with a tail, considered "ugly" by humans, according



to the grandmother, this can never happen (140). The sea witch, however, offers the mermaid a chance to win the prince and grow legs if she gives up her voice; when the mermaid worries she will not be able to communicate with the Prince to win his heart, the sea witch responds, “Your beautiful form, your graceful walk, and your expressive eyes; surely with these you can enchain a man’s heart” (142, 144). The language of the witch—the desire to “enchain”—implies a language of bondage; the mermaid must bind him, but only after she mutilates herself. Like the women of ancient China forced to bind their feet for upper class status, making every step painful, so too must this mermaid feel like she is “treading upon sharp knives” to complete her ascension (142).

The Prince, who discovers her on the beach naked, takes her in, falling in love with what will eventually lead to her displacement—her “deep blue eyes” that mirror the eyes of the princess he eventually marries. He treats the little mermaid like a pet; she sleeps outside his bedroom on a pillow. He calls her “my little dear mute foundling.” Her royal background becomes erased, and instead the Prince marries someone who was “brought up and educated in a religious house, where she was learning all the royal virtues” (146). The Prince mistakenly believes the aristocratic bride found him on the beach; in the end he is smitten with the woman chosen for him, the story then supporting—even in its critique—the rigid class hierarchies of Denmark’s feudal aristocracy that survived the transition into the mercantile economy of Andersen’s life.

The failure of romance to provide a vehicle for the mermaid to gain a higher position in her life, and hence in the afterlife as well, finds reverberations in Andersen’s relationship with Edvard, the object of Anderson’s erotic attention. Andersen writes to Edvard in 1838:

I’m longing for you, indeed, at this moment I’m longing for you as if you were a lovely Calabrian girl with dark eyes and a glance of passionate flames. . . . [Y]ou do not reciprocate my feelings! This affects me painfully or maybe this is in fact what binds me even more firmly to you. My soul is proud, the soul of a prince cannot be prouder . . . . Oh, I wish to God that you were very poor and I rich, distinguished, a nobleman. In that case I should initiate you into the mysteries, and you would appreciate me more than you do now. Oh! If there is an eternal life, as indeed there must be, then we shall truly understand and appreciate one another. Then I shall no longer be the poor person in need of kind interest and friends, then we shall be equal (qtd. in Bredsdorff 1975: 132-33).

As Jackie Wullschlager argues, the mermaid’s love for the prince easily parallels Andersen’s unrequited love for his adoptive brother for whom he was “held in affection but never considered as an erotic possibility” (2001: 174).

She also notes that in the original manuscript, there is a deleted ending in which the mermaid says, “I myself shall strive to win an immortal soul . . . that in the world beyond I may be reunited with him to whom I gave my whole heart,” an ending that suggests unification as central to the mermaid’s intention (174-5). But the passage from the letter above emphasizes how the erotic configuration has as much to do with class as unreturned adulation. Clearly, Andersen imagines himself in the position of the prince—“the soul of a prince cannot be prouder”—and enjoys the vision of his brother as a woman with “dark eyes,” “a glance of passionate flames,” who looks much like the little mermaid with her “deep blue eyes” (“as blue as the deepest sea”) and the flame imagery that surrounds her signature flowers with “blossoms like flames of fire” (Andersen 1984: 144, 134-135). As Wullschlager observes in other letters, the desire to find equality with his brother happens only in the afterlife, as Andersen imagines it (2001: 174-5); only in eternal life will the two men be “equal.”

Similarly, Andersen’s mermaid never wins the prince. Instead, she becomes a “daughter of the air,” a spiritual place where she can earn access to heaven through good works. When the sisters strike a bargain with the sea witch (their hair and the mermaid’s murder of the prince in exchange for the mermaid’s return home), she refuses. But because of her good act, she becomes “ethereal,” part of a group that lives “unseen by human eyes” and functions as a part of a broader fantasy related to Denmark’s colonial role in the world in the 1800s. The daughters of the air tell her, “We fly to warm countries, and cool the sultry air that destroys mankind with the pestilence. We carry the perfume of the flowers to spread health and restoration” (1984: 148). Reminiscent of the prince who flies the flags of all nations on his ship, she now, one could infer, becomes an agent in Denmark’s colonial project. Andersen’s tale, in fact, inhabits the broader field of children’s literature known historically for its colonizing function, raising young subjects to take their place in their world, part and parcel of imperialist fantasies of domination. In his homage to the genre, Andersen tacks on a moral: if readers perform good deeds, they can help mermaids gain eternal life more quickly. Here Andersen teaches young readers how to be “good” subjects. As children’s literature critic Jack Zipes notes,

Ironically, to have a soul in Andersen’s tales, one must sell one’s soul either to the aristocracy or to the bourgeoisie, something he clearly knew and felt. In any case, it was the middle-class moral and social code that guaranteed the success of his protagonists, guaranteed his own social success, and ultimately has guaranteed the successful reception of a select number of his tales to the present—canonical tales chosen consciously and unconsciously to maintain ideological notions that serve principles of domination (2005: 66).



The mermaid figure then educates her readers about class ideologies; they can only rise above their station through self-sacrifice and moral fortitude; only after death can they participate in a hierarchy that requires the subjugation of other countries through colonial domination.

### 3. ROSA GUY'S *MY LOVE, MY LOVE OR THE PEASANT GIRL*: DREAMS OF POSTCOLONIAL MERMAIDS

Rosa Guy, born in Trinidad in the 1920s, moved to Harlem to join her parents during World War I as a young girl. By the age of fourteen, she was orphaned, leaving her to live in a series of foster homes, work in a brassiere factory, and drop out of school (Norris 1988: 9). By nineteen she was married with a child, and after her marriage ended, she returned to Harlem and became a part of the Committee for the Negro in the Arts, whose members, Guy felt, “had a broad understanding of what was happening in the world in terms of the exploitation of black countries” and the relation of such exploitation to the plight of blacks in the United States (Wilson 1979: 20).

In 1950, she helped start the Harlem Writers Guild, an organization dedicated to supporting writers of the African diaspora; members included such greats as Maya Angelou, Audre Lorde, and Paule Marshall among many others (Norris 1988: 12-13). Guy knew firsthand the exigencies of growing up poor; she additionally knew the struggles of growing up West Indian in an African-American community that experienced extensive racial, economic, and social oppression. Her experiences led her to fight for the causes of people of color across geographic divides economically, socially, and politically.

In 1964, after extended visits to Haiti, she published a non-fiction article on Haiti in *Freedomways*, a publication dedicated to fighting for the rights of people of color. Her work here serves as an important backdrop for her commentary in her fiction:

In Haiti, more than in most places in Latin America, one can get a close look at imperialism and what it means to a poor country. Great play is given in the press, on how the money loaned to certain corrupt governments usually finds its way into the pockets of the government officials. What is left unsaid, is how much of that money, with the help of these officials, finds its way back into the United States through the pockets of the American firms, who get the contracts, the American employees who get the jobs (leaving the worker of the country unemployed) and who return to the U.S. twice as wealthy as they left, leaving behind them a monument of their duplicity, with their inferior work and inferior materials, while the receiving government continues to owe for the job (1964: 416).

She cites the U.S. government loan of five million dollars in 1941 to the Haitian-American Development Society to clear farming and forest land to grow the *crystotegia* plant, used in making synthetic rubber. The felling of trees and loss of coffee-producing land resulted in the loss of “hundreds of acres of rich land” that could have produced coffee during the war years, instead of being used for what became a failed experiment (Guy 1964: 421). Guy also locates the peasantry, dependent on firewood as fuel, as responsible for the deforestation of the island and the subsequent erosion of arable land. Guy channeled her frustration with Haiti’s poverty—so linked to a lack of natural resources and poor management of land, a history of unequal colonial and imperial relations, and a stratified class/color system—into a fictional story, a revision of Andersen’s fairy tale.

A village centenarian Monsieur Bienconnu (well known) sets the stage for Guy’s romance between an uneducated dark-skinned young woman and an aristocratic light-skinned young man. Bienconnu opens the romance with a fairy tale, a condensed folk interpretation of Haiti’s history. He begins,

Once upon a time . . . the mountains of this Jewel of the Antilles were thick with hardwood trees. The hardest in all the world. Trees reached up from the mountaintops to touch the heavens.

Asaka, goddess of the earth, of plants, of all growing things, how generous was her bounty then. She pushed a wilderness of herbs, of bush to thicken the underbrush, keeping the trees forever green, forever productive. . . .

Agwe, god of the sea, of our many waters—how gentle he was then. How tenderly he treated the voluptuous Asaka. He adored her. . . . Agwe’s caresses nourished the fruits of her work, and rained gently down on us (Guy 1985: 10-11).

This paradisiacal landscape becomes shattered with Haiti’s entrance into a world economy. Bienconnu continues, “Foolish me, what disaster they [the French] court with their greed. Cutting down our trees . . . and selling them for gain. . . . [T]hey sold their souls for a few pieces of silver. Ours, too” (12-13). He continues, metonymically representing Haitian history as the story of a family, the Beauxhommes. The patriarch, a wealthy French man, falls in love with a dark-skinned peasant girl. At the time of the Revolution, the son of this union chooses to fight against France while the father fights with Napoleon against Haiti. For his disloyalty and lack of patriotism, the elder curses his son: “Never shall the Beauxhomme be free of France. Their eyes shall forever be staring across the sea” (59). The senior Beauxhomme had fathered many children through concubines on the island, and the son, in his rage, excommunicates them all, claiming the hotel and grounds as a living space for

himself (59). Guy then links the decimation of the island to a history of colonialism, and class status to colorism. She relies on the Vodou pantheon—including Agwe, Asaka, Erzulie (goddess of love), and Papa Gé (god of death) to tell her story; this syncretic religion interweaves elements of West African religions and colonial relations, adding another layer of meaning to the story.

Guy transforms Andersen's mermaid into a version of Erzulie, a Haitian goddess who can take many forms, including Erzulie Freda, the goddess of love and vanity, Erzulie Danto, a dark-skinned protective and sometimes violent mother figure, and the sea spirit Lasirèn (Houlberg 1996: 30-1). Erzulie Freda, Maya Deren argues, stems from a family of spirits called Rada, Dahomean in ancestry, yet fashioned by New World conditions. During the 1700s, well-heeled French men took slaves as mistresses. As Joan Dayan notes, "[W]omen of color would be served, fed, honored, and adored and at the same time excluded from marriage, threatened by poverty, and often abandoned" (2005: 57). She argues that "Ezili, known in written representations as 'the Black Venus,' 'the Tragic Mistress,' or 'the Goddess of Love,' remains a commentary on the harrowing reality of Saint-Dominique" (58). Participants in Vodou ceremonies who are mounted by her wear "lace, perfume, jewels and sweets" (58)—the stuff of colonial history. Deren notes that during Vodou ceremonies Erzulie Freda is "fabulously rich" and "moves in an atmosphere of infinite luxury" (1970: 139); she performs an elaborate toilette and demands special soap, a mirror, a comb, and as well as necklaces, earrings, and bracelets of pearls and gold (139). Additionally, she wears three wedding bands, including one that signifies her marriage to Agwe, god of the sea (142). Erzulie Danto, her dark-skinned counterpart, part of the family of spirits called Petro or Petwo, is linked specially to Haitian slavery and the Revolution that gave birth to a new nation. She is the outraged mother, responding fiercely to attacks on her children (Deren 1970: 62). Lasirèn, also known as Erzulie of the Waters, is a sister to both (Houlberg 1996: 32). According to Alfred Métraux, "The Siren [in Haitian Vodou ceremonies] is represented according to European tradition but when she turns up in a sanctuary, the person possessed by her appears simply in the role of a coquette most careful of her looks" (1959: 365). She lives in the sea in an opulent castle, promising wealth to those who follow her. She can be very dark-skinned with long luxurious hair; she gazes repeatedly in her mirror (Houlberg 1996: 31). She represents aspects of Erzulie Freda, with her vanity and rich accoutrements, with her promises of dreams fulfilled. Yet she also can signify the rage of Erzulie Danto who often turns her anger against herself (Houlberg 1996: 32). Such threads of meaning find expression through a character appropriately named Désirée who embodies the characteristics of all three goddesses.

As the text opens, an elderly peasant couple finds Désirée in a tree after a storm near the ocean; her adoptive mother Euralie (phonetically similar to Erzalie) comments, “Agwe must have claimed this child for his own” (Guy 1985: 24). She returns home with the couple to work a small arid plot; she wears rags and suffers with them, the land never giving back enough for complete sustenance. When she is sixteen, she immerses herself in a brook that symbolically separates her family’s plot from acres owned by a rich landowner. In this interstitial space, she lies naked, letting the water cool her aching body. It is here that she remembers her history, the sea pounding around her. She reaches for a butterfly, silver and blue, onto which she fastens a wish—a wish to meet a wealthy young man so that she can escape her limiting circumstances. Later she hears the crash of a silver car into a tree in the midst of a storm. Inside, Daniel Beauxhomme, a young light-skinned man of wealth, struggles to stay alive, and she rescues him, nurses him, loves him, and bargains with Papa Gé—her soul for Daniel’s life. At a later Vodou ceremony, Erzulie Freda mounts a participant and offers her a chance to revoke this contract, but Désirée refuses, following a path alongside the sea to find his estate, where his father has taken him. On her journey, a merchant woman, whose loa is Erzulie, feeds her and bedecks her with a red magical comb, a blue dress, and pink shoes in exchange for a fruit. Then Désirée bathes in the “moonlit sea” and uses Erzulie’s comb to straighten her tangled hair into one lone braid, undergoing a visual transformation: “Her black skin, cleansed in the sea water and brightened by the blue dress, shone a deep velvet. Her eyes sparkled. Her teeth gleamed. All of this she saw reflected in the clear pools of water at the edge of the sea” (111). As one critic notes, Lasirèn has long luxuriant hair, appearing wet and shining; in images, she is often combing her hair. In folk art, she is featured with a blue or pink sequined tail (Houlberg 1996: 30-31). Désirée’s fascination with her mirror image also evokes Lasirèn’s dangerous power; as one researcher notes, Lasirèn

hovers large and dark and silent just below the surface of the water, a place Haitians call “the back of the mirror.” Gazing at her is like gazing at your own reflection. It is seductive because she gives a deeper and truer picture of self than is likely to be found in the mirrors of everyday life. But it is also dangerous to try to get too close or hold on too tightly to the vision. A person who reaches out to stroke her or tries to lie close by her broad and comforting side may, quite simply, drown (Brown 1991: 223).

Indeed Désirée has fallen in love with Erzulie Freda, the goddess who uses her feminine wiles to demand love from others. She feels pained by Erzulie’s requirements—the wearing of the pink shoes (a sign of class and civilization)

that do not fit her large feet: “Every step she took became a new experience in torture. Every step, as though from the turning of a screw, brought barbs of agony rushing from her crushed feet through her legs, her stomach, her heart” (Guy 1985: 112). This donning of shoes recalls the laws, enforced as late as the 1940s and ‘50s, that forced peasants to wear shoes upon entering the capital Port-au-Prince so that they might look more “civilized” (Plummer 1992: 40). In this story, Désirée is harassed by peasants outside the gate of the Beauxhomme’s estate because of her bare feet.

Désirée’s function as Lasirèn continues throughout the text. She finally reaches the estate of Daniel’s father, and enters, living by the pool where she frequently bathes, before she takes her place in Daniel’s bedroom, serving as both his nursemaid and mistress. He seeks to convince his father that she should be his wife by throwing a grand ball with ambassadors from around the world, but she does not speak their languages, so she can only dance and gaze at her admirers. Lasirèn is known for her dancing and “speak[ing] with her eyes” (Houlberg 1996: 32). Lasirèn also can move back and forth between either the cool, calming characteristics of Erzulie Rada aspects or the violently tempered Petro aspects (32). Désirée holds Daniel to her breast, protective of his health in light of the failure of Western medicines to heal him; she embodies the dark-skinned mother. Yet her actions also suggest those of Erzulie Freda, the mistress and coquette; she refuses to acknowledge the presence of another woman in Daniel’s life, namely the light-skinned woman of aristocracy who was chosen by his father to be his future wife. In the end, Désirée ends up in tears, the traditional ending to any ceremony in which Erzulie Freda is present. Abandoned by all men, she finds relief through tears and sleep (Deren 1970: 144-5). As Deren notes, Erzulie Freda is “the divinity of the dream, and it is in the very nature of the dream to begin where reality ends”; she has an eternally pierced heart (1970: 145).

Madame Mathilde, Daniel’s nurse, tries to explain to Désirée (who believes the gods have ordained her marriage with Daniel) the gods’ vision of island politics:

“They know how deep the love of peasant and patron runs. How strong the bonds that bind them. But hatred runs deeper.

“We peasants hate them because they reject our blackness. They hate us because we remind them of theirs. My child, that is the curse of the Antilles, created by the enslavement of our fathers” (Guy 1985: 142).

Imagining Daniel will marry her, Désirée gives him her final wish: “I want those mountains green again. I want hardwood trees reaching for the sun again. I want them to work together to end misery on this Jewel of the Antilles” (Guy 1985: 135). As Rhoda Zuk notes, “Désirée inhabits a dream

state of ambiguous memories and infinite, implacable desires that converge in the person of her prince. . . . Her lover, she believes, will marry her and restore the citizenry and its island” (1997-8: 170).

As the novel closes, the beautiful Désirée enters her own form of sleep. She meets Lucifus, the dark-skinned peasant gatekeeper, on the estate grounds, and through him the gods talk. Erzulie speaks first, “brashly, in vanity, and with assurance”: “So young Beauxhomme saw no good in you. . . . And it’s you who must pay” (Guy 1985: 154-155). Agwe speaks next: “Here, take this knife. Strike hard, strike deep. Let his [Daniel’s] blood flow heavy. Let it run down the sides of mountains. Let it spread over the land. He has betrayed you—betrayed us all. Only then will we gods be assuaged” (155). As Désirée gazes down at Daniel, she realizes all that she has lost—Mama Euralie, Tonton Julian—yet she cannot kill him. She wakes, as if from a dream, and then Lucifus tosses her from the estate, calling her “[p]easant swine. Mother of a dog” (158).

Outside she is trampled by peasants, just as Daniel marries his new wife. Lucifus throws her from her imagined heaven to a rival hell, framed by colonial religion; the church bells ring celebrating one marriage and marking another’s death. Guy describes Lucifus as Papa Gé: a “squat man” with eyes “burning blood-red in his black face” (1985: 104) with a “blood-red mouth,” smoking a cigar and wearing a top hat (144). He is also reminiscent of the loa zombi, a “demonic spirit recognized through dreams, divination, or possession” (Dayan 1995: 37). Considered the descendant of the historical Jean Zombi, a supporter of Jean-Jacques Dessaline, he is known for his “vile face,” red hair, and “wild eyes” (Madiou, Vol. 3: 168-9); he slaughtered whites with a dagger on the government steps and represents a violent response to colonialism in which the ruled react in ways that lead to bloodshed and further destruction.

The romance plot then becomes a critique of colonial and economic greed even as it traffics specifically in binaries that generate oppression—light/dark, upper/lower, rich/poor. Even though Désirée participates in her own downfall, believing in the Vodou gods (generated in part by the historical conditions of colonialism), Guy uses her character to draw attention to larger issues, namely the ongoing class and color system of Haiti. As Zuk notes, “The heroine’s self-abasement and social debasement betoken personal and collective ruination” (1997-8: 170). Indeed, Guy invokes a history of Haiti that has resulted in the decimation of ninety-seven percent of the forests (“Country Profile: Haiti” 2006: 10). The loss of the hardwoods began with the efforts of Haiti to compensate France for the loss of plantations following the Revolution (Plummer 1992: 54). As of 2006, eighty percent of the land was being farmed, even though only twenty-eight percent was considered arable



("Country Profile: Haiti 2006: 9-10). Researchers surmise that the high demand for coal and firewood that provides eighty-five percent of the population with its cooking needs, the high density rural populations, and unstable land-owning rights have together contributed to deforestation and subsequent erosion, making Haiti one of the least productive agricultural nations in the Caribbean and Latin America (Dolisca *et al.* 2007: 278-9). According to the United Nations World Food Program, one half of the population is "food insecure" with one half of children suffering from malnutrition ("Country Profile: Haiti, 2006: 11). Indeed, Désirée suffers from hunger for much of the novel, trampled by the peasants as the story closes in her weakness.

Guy encapsulates her version of Haiti's history in one telling scene in the novel. In a Vodou ceremony, Erzulie mounts a woman and argues with Agwe, god of the sea, about who is responsible for the destruction of the land, for the washing of soil into the ocean during the storms that have historically plagued the island. Agwe mounts a woman as well and responds—pointing to the audience of listeners in the houngfor (a sacred space for Vodou ceremonies)—that "[t]hey, they, they—and their so-called needs, the houses they must build, their ships, the statues that must be carved, the charcoal they have to burn" have led to the looting and destruction of the forests, leaving the land exposed and unable to absorb what it so desperately needs (Guy 1985: 75). Guy's repetition of "they" suggests a host of parties involved in the destruction of Haiti's landscape. She invokes the gods as a vehicle for critiquing the class structures they support, and the relationship between those structures and larger patterns of domination of Haiti by other countries through the residual effects of colonialism and transnational exploitation. Agwe taunts Erzulie: "Love, love, love. . . . They create sweet verses about love to celebrate their immortal souls, while they destroy land and sea" (76). Agwe then sets the tale in motion: "What we need is a grand romance. . . . Do you think the islanders can truly love each other? The grand hommes—can they truly love us?" (77). Guy relies on the image of the mermaid embodied in the Erzulies and Lasirèn to suggest she is not the one to offer hope. She is a sign of the arrival of colonialism and all its promises of wealth and material acquisition. When the traders and explorers, like Columbus, arrived with their trinkets and mirrors, they offered a fantasy. Guy presents the dreamlike nature of that vision; the mermaid figure with her illusions can only die tragically, stripped of her comb, mirror, jewels, and vanity.

#### 4. *ONCE ON THIS ISLAND: THE SACRIFICIAL MERMAID OF IMPERIALIST FANTASIES*

On May 6, 1990, a ninety-minute one act musical called *Once on This Island* opened off Broadway in a small venue called Playwright Horizon. From there it moved to the Booth Theatre on Broadway on October 18, 1990 for 487 performances, and made a debut in London at the Royalty Theatre on September 28, 1994. Based on Guy's novel, the story sprang to life through the lyrics of Lynn Ahrens, an American writer and lyricist, and the music of Stephen Flaherty, both of them best known for *Ragtime* (nominee for thirteen Tony Awards and winner of four during its first year on Broadway) and for the lyrics of *Anastasia*, a musical film, nominated for two Academy Awards and two Golden Globe Awards. *Once on This Island* likewise garnered wide critical attention. It was nominated for eight Tony Awards and won the Theatre World Award in 1991; in 1995, it won the Laurence Olivier Award in London for Best New Musical. The musical continues to be performed today in the U.S. and abroad. Its simple tropical setting, high energy dancing, upbeat songs, and romance plot support the light-hearted nature of the genre even as the mermaid figure faces a sacrificial end.

The musical is set on an unnamed Caribbean isle—"the Jewel of the Antilles"—where a young girl is frightened by a storm. Cast members join her, supporting her by telling her the story of dark-skinned Désirée Dieu-Donné (also called Ti Moune, "little orphan") who falls in love with a light-skinned wealthy man who feels he must follow tradition and marry someone in his class. As in Guy's book, Désirée does not realize that Daniel will not marry her until she has already fallen in love with him and become his mistress (reminiscent of colonial relationships between the upper class French men and enslaved Haitian women); unlike the book, she is not thrown outside the gates to be trampled by peasants but rather responds affirmatively to the gods' insistence that she accept Death's invitation:

Erzulie took her by the hand  
And led her to the sea  
Where Agwe wrapped her in a wave  
And laid her to rest  
And Papa Ge was gentle  
As he carried her to shore  
And Asaka accepted her  
And held her to her breast (Ahrens and Flaherty 1990: "Forever Yours").

The gods here, each one represented by only a single characteristic—love, sea, death, and land—lose their colonialist markers associated with Vodou to

become generic (if visually interesting) masked beings. On her journey to find Daniel, Désirée is cared for by Asaka, a type of classic earth mother who provides her with food, comfort, and protection. Désirée is still born of a storm and finds her love for Daniel during a storm (on a “road that leads to the sea”), but she loses her mermaid’s accoutrements—the mirror, the wealth, the fancy gowns—all markers assigned to Daniel’s aristocratic wife-to-be. Daniel sings,

Some girls  
Take hours  
To paint every perfect nail  
Fragrant as flowers  
All powdered  
And prim and pale (Ahrens and Flaherty 1990: “Some Girls”).

He notes that they are “clever and cultured / and worldly wise” (“Some Girls”). Like the pale skinned Erzulie Freda who inherited her vanity from her French toilette, so too does Andrea Devereaux, trained in “the best schools in France”; she enjoys mirrors, French cologne, and high-end cars. When Désirée objects to the marriage, Daniel responds, “I can’t change who I am, or where I am from”; “This is how things are done, Ti Moune. It’s expected” (“Some Girls”). While he offers her a place in his home after his marriage, he does not specify her options. Papa Gé tries to convince Désirée to kill Daniel for all the pain he has caused her, but instead she sacrifices herself to the sea, a death, the musical suggests, that leads to spiritual evolution. Through her self-sacrifice, “the Gods bless her,” transforming her into a tree that is breaking down the walls of the Hotel Beauxhomme, “so that its gates could never close again” (“Why We Tell This Story”). In this tree the son of Daniel and Andrea spies a young peasant girl, and the “spirit of Ti Moune” sets them free to love each other.

The young girl who opened the musical, to whom the actors tell the story, then begins to tell the story again. The musical ends with a spoken refrain:

There is an island  
Where the rivers run deep  
Where the seas sparkling in the sun  
Earns it the name Jewel of the Antilles  
An island where the poorest of peasants live  
And the wealthiest of grand hommes play  
And on this island . . .  
We tell this story. (Ahrens and Flaherty 1990: n.p.)

The story then becomes a story repeated; like a sacrificial lamb, the mermaid figure is brought repeatedly to the altar of her dreams. The phantasmagoric nature of the musical—with the tropical set, its shimmering lights like stars, its calypso rhythms, and bright Caribbean colors and masks—enhances the dreamlike quality of Désirée’s desire, suppressing the realities that mark the inequalities between U.S. audiences and the very real island inhabitants the musical fantastically represents. *The New York Times* theater critics were especially lured to the musical’s charms, ignoring the dichotomy between dreamscape and the social commentary imbedded in Rosa Guy’s origin story or even the social conditions to which these lyrics allude.

In his opening night review of the show in its first Off-Broadway performance, Frank Rich notes, for the *New York Times*, “the audience is drawn into the evening’s once-upon-a-time storytelling style and fantastical atmosphere” (1990: n.p.). He marvels at the “high-stepping, swivel-hipped calypso routines, [and] ecstatic ritual dances to demanding gods, a rollicking Caribbean counterpart to ‘Follow the Yellow Brick Road’ ” (1990: n.p.). The language of the review suggests the musical’s upbeat insistence on being no place, yet all places at once in the Caribbean. Rich locates it uncritically in a long history of Western representations of fantasy islands that have fueled the process of colonization. He describes the set as “a floor-to-ceiling mural emblazoned with faux-primitive flora and fauna, a tropical setting imagined in the Tahitian idiom of Gauguin.” He continues, “Mr. Flaherty’s lush, melodic music goes native in the way Richard Rodgers went ‘Oriental’ when writing ‘Bali Hai’ and ‘The March of the Siamese Children.’ The score is arranged with an apt trans-cultural lilt, for flute and bongo drum alike.” Rich’s invocation of the musical *South Pacific*, in particular the song “Bali Hai,” speaks to the interchangeability of such islands in Western imaginations; sites of illicit (interethnic) romance, lush flora, and mountainous terrain, these islands operate as signifiers of Western desire for an escape from material culture and a joyous abandonment of “civilized” mores. The summaries of the play for would-be purchasers of the script promise “*Once on This Island* delivers melody, love and joy in tropical abundance” (Guide to Musical Theater 2014: n.p.). The well-known Paper Mill Playhouse described its production as “a tale of romance, tragedy, redemption and rebirth with sunny songs, captivating choreography and an irresistible Calypso beat.” The islanders represent that edenic past where people “rollick” or “Follow the Yellow Brick Road” in some space outside of civilization. Rich closes his review by stating, “As the story and its tellers at last come full circle in *Once on This Island*, the audience feels the otherworldly thrill of discovering the fabric of its own lives in an enchanted tapestry from a distant shore” (1990: n.p.).

The harsh critique then of class in Andersen's tale and class, colonialism, and colorism in Guy's tale becomes lost, and whatever criticism is levied against social divisions in the story line becomes overshadowed by a mix of Caribbean pseudo-culture and singing and dancing. However, one reviewer notes, when Andrea, the French-schooled fiancé, meets Ti Moune at the ball, "the flat, painted-wood figurative candelabra wheeled in for the dance at the grandhomme ball . . . bring[s] to mind an itinerate salesman's wagon or a traveling puppet show" (Smith 1990: n.p.). Here the reviewer catches the critique of colonialism through the stage prop, but this commentary remains overlooked by most reviewers.

The play opened five years after the publication of Guy's book. The conditions in Haiti had deteriorated during this time, and U. S. involvement in Haiti had shifted as the political landscape had changed. The U.S.'s thirty-year support of the Duvalier regimes led to high levels of anti-Americanism; the anger was fueled by a history of favored trade relationships that benefitted the upper class, the location of Haiti in 1985 (based on theories generated from U.S. scientists) as the link in the AIDs disease from central Africa to the U.S, and the provision of riot equipment to the Haitian military following the destruction of Duvalier property and holdings by an outraged populace (Plummer 1992: 216-19, 224). The ongoing political instability continued into the late 1980s, including the toppling of U.S. supported elections in 1987. Widely televised human rights abuses, including the murder of many of the political candidates in 1987 by government forces, speaks in part to the inability of the U.S. to influence political conditions as the military or returning members of the Duvalier regimes rapidly filled power vacuums.

Additionally, featured repeatedly in the U.S. news was the response of the U.S. government to thousands of refugees trying to escape from Haiti during the 1970s and '80s. Known as the "boat people," these refugees faced a form of discrimination that many in the U.S. deemed racist. As Maryse Noelle-Mills notes, "Between 1981 and 1990, only 11 Haitians out of a total of over 22,000 were allowed to pursue their claims for asylum in the U.S. The rest were sent back to Haiti on the grounds that they did not qualify as 'political' refugees" (1992: n.p.). Following the ouster of Jean-Baptiste Aristide during his first time in office (elected in December 1990 and deposed September 1991), the rate of Haitians accepted for asylum was only ten percent; in the four months after his overthrow, the number of Haitians seeking asylum rose to 14,443, forcing U.S. legislators to reconsider their stance on Haitian immigrants who had faced a long history of violent, political oppression (Noelle-Mills 1992: n.p.).

The circular nature of the musical in which a cast tells a young girl about the death of a beautiful dark-skinned woman, who then prepares to tell the

story again, reflects the ongoing nature of the story—"An island where the poorest of peasants live / And the wealthiest of grand hommes play" (Ahrens and Flaherty 1990: n.p.). The musical returns its audience to a 1950's vision where "natives" sing on remote islands for Westerners, suffering no visible economic hardships at an historical moment when relations between the financially able, white-dominated U.S. and the impoverished black-dominated nation of Haiti was especially visible in the U.S. press. To return to a musical past where everything is upbeat in order to stage a poor dark-skinned woman's suicide as a site of transformation is tragic. What the romance occludes is the powerful social commentary that the mermaid figure finally offers; she—the dreamer who longs to leave her poverty behind to cross class and color barriers through the vehicle of marriage—must give up her fantasy and walk boldly towards her death. Her presence signifies what she can never have—wealth, position, acceptance in the upper echelons of power.

## 5. MERMAIDS AMONG US

Mermaids, then, transform and become land creatures, travelling across continents, telling not stories of wealth but rather unrelenting poverty. Alex Van Stipriaan notes that they show up exactly where they are needed as an imaginary force, in social groups who need them because of their own lack of resources (2003: 325). In Haiti, *Lasirèn* graces the walls of *houngfors* but also stores selling lottery tickets (Hourihan 1996: 32). Once a year in Haiti, people dress in *Erzulie's* scarves, wearing hearts, and head towards Sodo (meaning waterfall—*Saut D'eau* in French) to bathe in *Erzulie's* waters. Diviners stand at the waterfall's base, offering advice for those needing work or healing (Galembo 2008: 570). As Phyllis Galembo notes, in her visits there for the event between 1997 and 2001, "Practitioners use a ceremonial gourd and pour the sacred water over themselves, creating a beautiful veil" (2008: 570). They leave behind old clothes, signifying their renewal and transformation (571). Mermaids, then, in all three literary versions seem to articulate the story of wealth that never arrives. They transform from the mutilated body of Andersen's beauty to the starvation and trampling of Guy's protagonist to the celebratory death of a dark-skinned woman in a Broadway musical. Her allure, with her mirrors, her jewels, and *her silence* speaks volumes about the value accorded those who are caught within signifying systems that insist on subjugation in order for the story to go on.



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